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NF05-651 Learning from Children About Severe Weather

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Learning from Children About Severe Weather

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At 8:08 p.m. the National Weather Service in Omaha issued a tornado warning for Gage County in southeast Nebraska until 9:15 p.m. At 8:03 p.m. a tornado was on the ground six miles south of Wilber moving northeast at 25 mph. At 8:16 p.m. law enforcement officials reported a tornado on the ground near Wilber moving northeast at 15 mph.

These warnings were heard by those listening to television or radio and struck fear in the hearts of many on the night of May 22, 2004. It was on that night that tornadoes roared through many communities in Nebraska. One destroyed the town of Hallam, killing one woman and injuring many others. This same storm system hit the edge of Wilber and destroyed several area homes and farmsteads. In all, storms in Lancaster, Saline, Gage and Cass counties destroyed 158 homes and damaged at least 57 others. Nebraska averages 39 tornadoes per year and is ranked fifth in the United States for total number of tornadoes.

In the days and weeks that followed, children who had gone through the stormy night began to voice their fears. Many no longer wanted to stay home alone. Others were afraid of storm clouds. How children perceive severe weather and what adults can do to help them deal with their fears became the focus of this extension study. (To view actual video of the Wilber tornado, access this Web site at Saline County Under the heading "Water," click on "*Wilber Tornado* for Broadband Connections.)

What Do Children Have to Say About Severe Weather?

Wilber-Clatonia Public School teachers requested extension personnel meet with classes and lead a positive discussion with students regarding weather in Nebraska. Discussions were held with approximately 255 students in grades K-6.

One concern was that students might not want to share or talk about their storm experiences; that some might even break into tears from the memories associated with the storms, and be embarrassed or teased by other children. Thus, extension and teachers began each discussion by sharing their own storm-related stories. Then students were asked to share their stories. This method worked well. There was a great deal of youthful energy in each of the classrooms as students were eager to share. Many hands

were raised for long periods of time and it was not possible to have every child relate in the 45-minute sessions. There was lots of laughter and humor from the students as they related personal stories. Fears of tears and of students not wanting to share went unrealized.

The general questions to elicit stories from the children were:

- What did you see?
- How did you feel about it?
- How did you deal with it?
- What did you learn from it?

It was pointed out to the children that adults also can be scared; that it is normal to be afraid during storms; and that they need to keep talking about their experiences with families and friends.

Following are a few of the stories related by the children:

- Fourth-grader Marissa shared that the tornado hit her house and, "It was really scary." The family moved to the basement and hid under the stairs. Marissa remembered her ears were popping. Her mother said the entire area outside was dark (indicating that power was out). When the other tornadoes came later in the summer, Marissa confided, "It made me shaky."
- Last year during the tornado, a third-grader shared that his parents' best friends were trapped in their house. Others couldn't get them out because the chain saw was out of gas. When asked, "What did you learn?" this young man responded, "Weather in Nebraska can be really dangerous," and, "People take care of other people."
- Second-grader Max remembered he was at his grandparents. They went downstairs, where there were lots of spiders and he exclaimed, "I'm scared of spiders!" Later there was leaking in the house. His father answered the phone, "Noah's Ark!" Max continued to describe the scene. "I was taking a shower in the living room." (Laughter by the class.) Humor, even in times of extreme hardship, can be a safety net.

What Do Parents Need to Know?

The more parents encourage their children to talk about severe weather, the better children will feel. Start talking to them right away: When a storm is on the way, after the storm has passed, and time and time again afterwards. Children need to keep talking about their experiences. It is how all of us make sense out of things as human beings.

Children sometimes become the lost souls of a family in crisis. Adults can get so caught up in their own feelings that they don't realize how emotional and difficult the experience is for children. Also, sometimes adults think it's better to keep quiet and avoid stirring things up with the kids. But kids are aware that the adults in their lives are dealing with powerful emotions. They know something is happening and it's important. They may not always get the facts straight, but they're aware of the tension adults are experiencing. If adults don't address difficult issues, the children will have to carry this burden all alone. They may feel it's their fault. Adults need to be aware of what children feel and think, to listen to them, and talk openly and honestly with them.

If unsure where to start, try using the previous questions to help get the child(ren) to start talking. This will be an ongoing process: Adults don't get this figured out in one conversation and neither do children. It may not be easy for adults to discuss this over and over, but it is necessary to help the kids work through their fears and anxieties.

>Activities That Can Help Children Cope

- Have children talk to grandparents or parents and tape record or write down their storm-related stories.
- Have toys such as fire trucks, ambulances, building blocks, puppets and dolls available that encourage play reenactment of children's experiences and observations.
- Children need close physical contact during times of stress to help them feel a sense of belonging and security. Structured children's games that involve physical touching are helpful in this regard; for example, Ring Around the Rosie; London Bridge; Duck, Duck, Goose; and so forth.
- Have the children do a mural on long paper or draw pictures about the storm focusing on what happened in their house or neighborhood when the big storm hit. Adults should help discuss these drawings afterwards.
- When adults share their own feelings, fears and experiences, it legitimizes children's feelings and helps them feel less isolated. If adults were afraid, then it's OK for children to be afraid, also.
- Adults need to admit when they don't know the answers to questions. Find out the answers and let the children know what they are.
- Explain to children that disasters are very unpredictable, and may cause things to happen that can even trouble adults. Even so, adults will always work very hard to keep children safe and secure.

Know When to Make Referrals

The following list of behaviors could indicate a child may need qualified professional help to deal with the storm-related stress. When the child:

- demonstrates the desire to hurt himself or herself or others;
- repeatedly expresses himself or herself in somber or self-deprecating terms;
- starts to rely on dark colors and themes in artwork;
- continues to act out aggressively or violently;
- becomes more immature or too mature;
- repeatedly wants to be alone;
- sets fires or commits other destructive acts; and
- deliberately and repeatedly harms animals.

Resources

Books to Read With Children:

Ivy Ruckman, *Night of the Twisters*, Crowell/Harper Collins, 1984.

Lorraine Jean Hopping, *Wild Weather: Lightning*, Scholastic, 1999.

Mari Sandoz, *Winter Thunder*, Westminster Press, 1954.

Marty Rhodes Figley, *The Schoolchildren's Blizzard*, Carolrhoda Books, 2004.

Mary Pope Osborne, *Twister on Tuesday*, Random House Books For Young Readers, 2001.

Susan Canizares and Betsey Chessen, *Storms*, Scholastic, 1998.

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